DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 416 006 PS 026 210

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TITLE	The Rights and Responsibilities of Interracial Families.
PUB DATE	1989-00-00
NOTE	9p.; Typescript with occasional pen/pencil corrections.
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Family (Sociological Unit); *Parent Responsibility; *Parent Rights; Parent Role; *Parents; Racial Factors
IDENTIFIERS	Biracial Children; *Biracial Family; Family Responsibility; Family Rights; Interracial Children; *Interracial Family; Mixed Race Persons

ABSTRACT

In view of the increasing number of interracial relationships and families, and the concomitant emphasis on religious, cultural, racial, ethnic, and national identity (and their contribution to pride, self awareness, and community), this paper examines the rights and responsibilities of interracial families to challenge the emerging trend toward cultural nationalism and ethnic pride and respond to the increasing racism. The paper identifies several rights of interracial families, including: (1) the right to live according to personal beliefs as long as the beliefs are not immoral or illegal; (2) the right to not be intimidated by people pursuing their own political or social agenda; (3) the right to determine what is best for personal happiness and development; (4) the right to live and raise families without prejudice and harassment; and (5) the same rights as all other American parents. The responsibilities of interracial families are identified as: (1) to recognize the enormity of the decision to marry interracially; (2) to not retreat from society; (3) to not support any form of prejudice or be drawn into causes that perpetuate division and hatred; (4) to give children the courage and tools to be successful in fighting institutional and personal racism; (5) to reject efforts to make them feel guilty; (6) to affirm the normalcy of their situation; and (7) to raise children with a clear and proud sense of a biracial or multiracial identity. (KB)

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The Rights and Responsibilities of Interracial Families.

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by

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During the sixties, when black men and white women began to date and marry in ever larger numbers, racists proclaimed this trend would adulterate the purity of the white race, and these relationships were products of purely ulterior motives. Liberals of both races reacted to these objections with indignation. Most even-minded Americans viewed this phenomena as the natural result of a more integrated society, where people of different races mixed at school and in the workplace. A more cosmopolitan population seemed a logical - and desirable - result of the Civil Rights victory.

Today there continues to be a rise in interracial realtionships and families, with a shift to black women, and other women of color, marrying white men. Suddenly the shoe is on the other foot, with blacks and liberal whites protesting this new phenomena will destroy the black culture, and emasculate the black male. Black women and women of color are accused of betraying their people, forsaking their men, and marrying for purely ulterior motives. There is much support for this argument - a recognition minority cultures must protect their cultural integrity, avoid the negative influence of the majority culture, and develop a sense of cultural pride and unity. Out-marriage by women of color is seen as a direct threat to this effort, also in Hispanic, Asian and other minority groups. Sociologists, social workers,

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popular black publications, minority politicians, cultural anthropologists and some educators support this position.

This new militancy towards cultural purity and integrity by minority groups comes at a time when the entire country is placing more emphasis on religious, cultural, racial, ethnic and national identity, and on how membership in these groups contributes to pride, self/awareness, and community. Religious groups are demanding more Christianity (of their kind) in our schools; parents are being told by popular publications how to raise thier children with cultural and religious identity; American Jews are struggling with issues of religious and cultural consistency; univerity students are demanding literature and art classes relevant to their cultural heritage; Head Start has a national Multicultural Task Force, charged with developing ways to support the different cultural backgrounds of Head Start children; and books, journal articles, and conference sessions are dedicated to instilling cultural pride in Afro-American children.

At the same time this country is experiencing a resurgence of racial hatred and intolerance:skin-head violence; the recent bombings in the South, and anti-minority and anti-Jewish graffiti.

Those of us who are members of interracial families believe people are free to cross traditional barriers (including race) to marry; children of interracail unions have a rich, unified multi-cultural heritage; and individuals choose their own values, attributes, and loyalties. We also believe all barriers are arbitrary, and all people have the right to achieve their full potential, regardless of their cultural, religious, or racial identity. How do we fit in, cope with, and challenge the emerging

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trend toward cultural nationalism and ethnic pride? How do we respond to the increasing racism in this country? I believe we can address this issue under the dual headings of rights and responsibilities of interracial families.

Rights.

We have a fundamental right in this country to live according to what we believe - so long as we are not immoral or break the law. We have the right to do so, without harassment from other people and employers, and without people making us feel guilty. I would never tell someone else who to marry, question the genuineness of their love, or disagree with other important choices they have made. I don't have the right!

We have a right not to be intimidated by people who are pursuing their own political or social agendas. Obviously we don't believe in racial, cultural or ethnic purity. I believe my marriage symbolizes the unity between differences; I also believe national, racial and cultural purity - of any kind - is a destructive and facist notion. I reject white racial purity, black racial purity, and Native American racial purity.

As individuals we have a r-ight to determine what is best for our own happiness and development. This is the fundamental basis of this country. And this includes people choosing to marry whomever they wish. If that choice makes their life more difficult, then they will live with the consequences. If society is not ready for this choice, then they will have to change society. But no one has the right to say they cannot make that choice, they are betraying their people, or they are joining the enemy. No group in this country has the right to tell individuals what they can and cannot do.

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And no one in his right mind would accuse anyone of marrying me for money or status!

While we have a right to live and raise our families without prejudice and harassment, and we certainly understand our progressive statement about racial harmony and respect for differences will cause fear among the less educated, we must demand respect and understanding from professionals - teachers, social workers, writers, journalists, editors, sociologists, college professors and TV producers. We must continually harass these professionals until we are treated with respect, objectivity, and accuracy.

Most importantly, we have the same rights as all other American parents - to raise our children according to our own beliefs, values, traditions and expectations. More and more interracial families are raising their children with a rich combination of the total heritage of both parents: culture, language, history, and race. I have this right, just like the Jewish family, Catholic family, lawyer's family, and family of the polititian. This right to raise my children as a rich unification of both parents' heritages includes the right for an accurate demographic category for my child. I have been accused by school officials of being overly sensitive about my child's racial identity, when I insisted she be categorized as biracial (there is no such category); a Chicago parent was told her child could not attend the public school unless the parent determined he be either black or white; my 12-year-old, who has decided to fill out all her forms in the "other" category, expessed in frustration, "I'm tired of being an other."

Responsibilities

I don't believe in telling individuals what to do; and history

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has shown movements that dictate their beliefs and behaviors to their members soon become c rrupt. However, if this new multiracial movement is to progress, I believe we all have some major responsibilities to perform. So here I am presenting some suggestions for other interracial families and multiracial people.

We have the responsibility to recognize the enormity of our decision to marry interracially. Much of society sees this decision as an outward challenge to all that is secure, comfortable, and traditional. It goes beyond challenging racial boundaries: it challenges all boundaries -religious, political, educational, national and economic. Fundamentally we are challenging the notion of living one's life to meet society's approval - a concept that found its zenith in 1980's yuppiedom.

Because our action has so fundamentally challenged society, we cannot retreat,living as though nothing has happened. In raising our children, responding to our communities, and supporting social causes, we must recognize this fact. We cannot support racist concepts - like the objection to transracial aboption; we cannot say we will raise our children with the identity of the parent of color, "because society sees them that way" (remember, we rejected what society sees when we married), and we cannot support any form of prejudice - from whites, blacks, or between different minority groups. In our sensitivity to people of color, we must be careful not to be drawn into causes that perpetuate division and hatred. We can easily see when whites are the protagonists; but it goes both ways. Recently I read about a curriculum for preschool black children. One of its objections was to teach these children, 'who the enemy is.' It's easy to be drawn into this 'us' versus 'them' mentality. We cannot allow this to happen.

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However, we cannot deny that our children do have a minority heritage, will have to fight against institutional racism, and will have some experiences different from those of their white parent. We have a responsibility to give our children the courage and tools to be successful in these struggles.

Our marriage is a statement to society that we reject all prejudice, from all sides.

We have a responsibility to reject efforts to make us feel guilty. We must feel proud of our contribution to the equality of all. We must forthrightly respond to anyone who says we have rejected our people, married for ulterior motives, or forsaken our duty. Our ultimate duty is to follow what we believe. With all the battles we must fight, because of our marriage decision, - battles with relatives, schools, neighbors, peers of our children, etc. - we must not take on this guilt. We must proudly assert what we are doing is good, just, and correct.

. And we have the responsibility to affirm the normalcy of our situation. Marrying someone whom you love, regardless of race or ethnic background, fits into the honorable tradition of Romeo and Juliet, West Side Story, and the liberation of the human soul. This is what Western Society, through art, literature, drama, and music, has expressed for centuries. It is the fulfilment of the highest aspirations of men and women. During the history of mankind-the taboos of laws, slavery, royalty, aristocracy, nationalism and religion notwithstanding - people of different races who have loved each other have persisted and survived. And, in the realm of nature, animals and plants have created fantastic combinations and unique specimens through cross-breeding. Variability and variety are natural phenomenas; sameness and segregation are

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man made.

Great movements in the liberation of men and women have come about through the efforts and beliefs of average participants in the cause. Rosa Parks triggered the Civil Rights movement; thousands of women directed the Women's Sufferage Movement; todays Women's Movement has been fueled by women from every level of society. We have a responsibility to make sure interracial families and multiracial people continue to direct our movement. We cannot let polititians, demographers, professionals and researchers define our movement for us.!

And, most importantly, we have the responsibility to raise our children with a clear and proud sense of a biracial, or multiracial identity. To reject this responsibility is to admit that society is correct, that people must be separated into arbitrary, distinctive categories. It also means we deny our children part of their heritage - we say, as we have historically said to minorities - that part of their heritage is dishonorable, and unacceptable. An interracial child raised with the identity of just one of his parents will, deep down, learn there is something wrong with the notion of an interracial family. Because the world is broken down into distictive, racial groupings, combinations of people from these groups is wrong, and children who are products of interracial unions will believe there is something wrong with them. This is unacceptable.

Conclusion.

The interracial movement in this country is gaining members, exposure, and stability (note the national publications, Interrace, Communique, and Melange, and considerable TV exposure). At the same time society as a whole seems to be regressing toward cultural

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purity, group isolationism, and increased racism. Within this milieu we, as members of interracial families, must clearly understand our rights and responsibilities, so we can move forward to provide a healthy future for our children.

Dr. Wardle writes nationally on a variety of family, education and child-related topics. He has been writing about interracial families for ten years.

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